Are BFRs responsible for brominated dioxins and furans (PBDD/Fs) in food?

Martin Rose and Alwyn Fernandes.

The Food and Environment Research Agency, Sand Hutton, YORK YO41 1LZ. UK.

Introduction

Relatively little is known about the environmental and toxicological significance of polybromodibenzo-p-dioxins (PBDDs), polybromodibenzofurans (PBDFs) and mixed bromochloro dibenzo-p-dioxins and dibenzofurans (PBrClDD/Fs). Chlorinated analogues have been studied intensively whereas brominated and mixed bromochloro analogues have been studied to a much smaller extent. Theoretically, there are a total of 5020 brominated, chlorinated or mixed bromochloro dibenzo-p-dioxin or furan congeners (Table 1). All of these compounds resist chemical transformations, have a low biological degradation rate, are lipophilic, stable and persistent (D'Silva et al, 2004).

Table 1: Number of PCDD/F, PBDD/F and PBrClDD/F congeners.

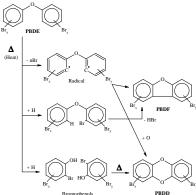| Compound	Substitution : Mono	Di	Tri	Tetra	Penta	Hexa	Hepta	Octa	Total
PBDD	2	10	14	22	14	10	2	1	75
PBDF	4	16	28	38	28	16	4	1	135
PCDD	2	10	14	22	14	10	2	1	75
PCDF	4	16	28	38	28	16	4	1	135
PBrClDD	0	14	84	254	420	452	252	74	1550
PBrClDF	0	28	168	496	840	880	504	134	3050
							Grand Total PXDD/F congeners		5020

Formation

Figure 1: Possible mechanisms for formation of PBDD/Fs from PBDEs and bromophenols.

There are four main categories of formation; *thermal*, *chemical*, *photochemical* and *biological*. Thermal formation may be subdivided into '*de novo*' synthesis and '*formation from precursors*'. Evidence suggests that the addition of bromine to a furnace during combustion actually increases the amount of PCDD/Fs produced, whilst maintaining high levels of formation of PBDD/Fs and PBrClDD/Fs. After the incineration of waste containing BFRs it has been shown that mixed PBrClDD/Fs predominate, in particular dibromo-dichloro substituted dibenzofuran congeners. Chemical precursors such as brominated and chlorinated phenols or PBDEs can form halogenated dioxins and/or furans. These reactions often take place at temperatures between 250 and 500°C, usually on catalytically active surfaces,but sometimes spontaneously (Figure 1). PBDEs can contain PBDD/Fs as chemical impurities and can form PBDD/Fs during thermal processing of materials (such as extrusion, moulding and recycling) and by degradation within the temperature range 350–400°C. It has been shown that PBDD/Fs can also be formed during UV-irradiation of decabromodiphenyl ether (Olsman et al, 2002).

Recently, there have been reports that some lower brominated PBDD congeners (tri- tetra-) can be found in the marine environment and bio-accumulate in some marine species, such as shellfish

(Malmvern et al. 2005; Haglund et al. 2007). These studies targeted the PBDD rather than PBDF molecules and the occurrence of specific di- and tri- PBDDs was recorded, with lower levels of tetrabrominated congeners. The authors suggested that this specific distribution originates from marine biogenic processes. The formation of individual PBDD congeners is thought to proceed through condensation reactions of naturally occurring bromophenols, mediated by the action of bromoperoxidases in the presence of bromide (Haglund et al. 2007). This formation pathway is likely to be governed by kinetic processes which would explain the relative abundances of the individual congeners.

Toxicity of PBDD/Fs and PBrClDD/Fs
Most investigations on dioxin emissions, environmental contamination and toxicology have focused on PCDD/Fs only, and no comprehensive knowledge on PBDD/Fs or PBrClDD/F exists. On an interim basis the World Health Organisation suggests that the current toxicity equivalency factors for PCDD/Fs should also be applied to PBDD/Fs (WHO, 1998).

Limited studies with PBDD/Fs have shown that all of the classic effects demonstrated for 2,3,7,8-T_4CDD and related PCDD/Fs – lethality, wasting, thymic atrophy, teratogenisis, reproductive effects, chloracne, immunotoxicity, enzyme induction, decrease in T4 and vitamin A and increased hepatic porphyrins – have been observed with PBDD/Fs. Binding affinities to the Ah receptor were varied but of a similar order to those of their chlorinated analogues. Experimentally derived potencies of PBDD/Fs and PBrClDD/Fs relative to 2,3,7,8-T_4CDD are summarised (Table 2). PBDD/Fs and PBrClDD/Fs have been shown to be equipotent or in some cases more potent than some of their chlorinated analogues; with 2,3-Dibromo-7,8-dichlorodibenzo-p-dioxin and 2,3,7,8-T_4BDD shown to elicit twice the toxic response of 2,3,7,8-T_4CDD (Table 2, with original references given in D'Silva et al, 2004).

PBDD/Fs and PBrClDD/Fs in the environment
PBDD/Fs and PBrClDD/Fs were not found, despite low LODs (<1 ppt) in a survey of salmon, osprey and human milk by Wiberg et al. (1992) and they were indicated but below the LOQ in carp in a study by Loganathan et al (1995). Watanabe et al. (2004) reported PBDD/Fs and monobromo PBrClDD/Fs in airborne dust in Osaka, Japan. PBDD/Fs and PBrClDD/Fs have also been detected in incineration fly ash in several studies, none of which have been congener specific to date. Indications were that lower halogenated congeners (X = 1 to 5) are most prevalent and of those found it appeared that mainly chloro substitution was found i.e. monobromo-polychloro and dibromo-polychloro compounds were evident with little evidence of the more fully bromo- substituted compounds. Generally the concentrations of PBDD/Fs and PBrClDD/Fs detected in the environment and in biota are very low. Many of the studies of PBDD/Fs and PBrClDD/Fs in the environment were conducted a number of years ago. Given the increasing levels of other bromine-containing molecules in the environment, such as PBDEs and other BFRs, it is not unreasonable to expect that levels PBDD/Fs and PBrClDD/Fs may also have increased.

PBDD/Fs and PBrClDD/Fs in food
The primary route of human exposure to dioxins and furans is from the diet. Although there is an increasing amount of data on PCDD/Fs that has been generated over the last couple of decades, there is very little on PBDD/Fs and PBrClDD/Fs. For this reason, combined with the impact of increased bromine use, we have investigated the presence of PBDD/Fs in foods over the last few years

(Fernandes et al., 2008, 2009(a) and 2009 (b)) and summarise our findings here. Mixed PBrClDD/Fs are subject to a current research investigation and results will be published later.

Methodology
The methodology used for the analysis of 12 PBDD/F congeners was validated and accredited to the ISO-17025 standard. A full description of the procedures used for the extraction and analysis has been previously reported (Fernandes et al., 2004; Fernandes et al., 2008). It is based on methodology used for PCDD/Fs that has been in place for many years and has been verified by successful participation in many interlaboratory and proficiency testing exercises. In brief, samples were fortified with ^{13}C-labelled analogues of target compounds and exhaustively extracted using mixed organic solvents. PBDEs were chromatographically fractionated from the PBDD/Fs on activated carbon. The two fractions were further purified using adsorption chromatography on alumina. Analytical measurement was carried out using high-resolution gas chromatography coupled to high-resolution mass spectrometry (HRGC-HRMS).

Samples
The samples discussed in this paper came from surveys of contaminants including PBDD/Fs in a variety of Irish food and in UK shellfish. Details of these surveys have been reported previously (Fernandes et al., 2008, 2009(a) and 2009 (b)).

Results and Discussion
In the absence of TEFs for PBDD/Fs, values for chlorinated analogues have been used in line with the recommendation from WHO discussed above. There is evidence that some of these values are only approximations, and so this must be seen as indicative. Results are reported here on a fat weight basis.

PBDD/Fs were found in the majority of samples analysed as part of a survey of Irish food, apart from penta- and hexa-BDDs which were not found in any of the samples. The frequency of occurrence was lower than that observed for PBDEs in the same samples. As observed in other studies (Food Standards Agency 2006c; Fernandes et al. 2008, 2009(b)), PBDFs were more prevalent than PBDDs, as might be anticipated given the environmental occurrence and chemistry of formation. The most frequently found congeners were 2,3,7,8-TBDF, 23478-PBDF, 2,3,8-TBDF and 1,2,3,4,6,7,8-HpBDF of which the first two contributed most to the TEQ. This contrasts with PCDD/Fs in similar food matrices, where most 2,3,7,8-Cl-substituted PCDDs and PCDFs are usually present. As generally found for PBDEs, the highest levels and greatest frequency of occurrence was seen in samples of liver (range 0.18–3.49 ng kg^{-1} TEQ) which is consistent with the functionality of this organ in the processing of lipids. The lowest levels were observed for milk (range 0.09–0.30 ng kg^{-1} TEQ) and poultry fat (range 0.15–0.27 ng kg^{-1} TEQ), although eggs showed a higher frequency of occurrence. The TEQ values for PCDD/Fs were comparable to values recorded for similar foods in the last survey carried out for Irish food in 2004 (Food Safety Authority of Ireland 2004) with reported values of 0.08–0.62 ng kg^{-1} PCDD/F TEQ for fats, and 0.32–4.04 ng kg^{-1} PCDD/F TEQ for liver.

Whilst concentrations of individual congeners varied with food type, the widespread occurrence in the relatively cleaner environment of Ireland underlines the ubiquity of these contaminants (Ireland generally shows food contamination levels below the European average for environmental contaminants such as dioxins and PCBs, except following specific contamination incidents). The foods of animal origin that were measured in the survey of Irish food were generally as expected; ie those likely to show the presence of these contaminants due to their lipophilicity.

PBDD/Fs were detected in most shellfish samples at varying concentrations depending on the species. The calculated TEQs were higher in scallop gonad than in mussels (0.083 ng/kg compared to 0.055 ng/kg whole weight, respectively), although mussels showed a more complete range of detectable congeners, particularly the PBDFs. Relatively lower TEQs were detected in the scallop adductor muscle and this may relate to the lower lipid content of the adductor. The contribution to TEQ was derived mainly from 2,3,7,8-TBDF, 2,3,4,7,8-PBDF and 2,3,7,8-TBDD. This composition was similar to the TEQ distribution of PCDD/Fs where, for fish and shellfish, these congeners, along with 1,2,3,7,8-PCDD, are often the main contributors. Most samples in this study showed the presence of tri-bromo PBDD/Fs. In particular, 2,3,7-tribromo dioxin was the predominant congener in oysters, native oysters (Ostrea edulis) showing relatively elevated levels (up to 14.5 ng/kg whole weight).

The toxicology of the tribrominated PBDD/Fs is the subject of continuing international study, with available toxicological data indicating that these compounds elicit more potent biological responses than their chlorinated analogues. It should particularly be noted that the concentrations of tri-bromo substituted PBDD/F congeners reported here have not been included in the summed TEQs, as there are no recognised analogous TEF values for trichloro substituted PCDD/Fs. Moreover, although the levels of tri- and tetra- BDD/BDF congeners are elevated in comparison to the other 2,3,7,8-Br substituted compounds, they occur at a relatively low level in comparison to other non-laterally substituted tri- and tetra- congeners that were present in the samples. The greater abundance of these congeners (some are orders of magnitude higher in occurrence), merits further research, both in terms of toxicology (none is currently available), as well as occurrence in other marine and aquatic species, particularly those used as food. Although PBDD/Fs exposure in humans has been reported, data on the tri-brominated compounds was not available. However, apart from the levels reported in this work, tri-brominated compounds have also been detected in other foods, which makes it likely that humans are exposed to these compounds. Apart from 2,3,7-tribromoBDD, the occurrence of PBDFs generally predominates that of PBDDs, reflecting profiles observed for environmental samples, which in turn mirror the formation chemistry of these molecules through thermodynamic pathways that are a feature of combustion processes.

PBDE commercial mixtures are reported to be one of the major sources of PBDD/Fs (D'Silva et al. 2004), which occur as contaminants in the mixtures. Hayakawa et al. (2004) report a positive correlation between these two groups in atmospheric deposition. There is very little information on pathways for PBDD/Fs or the occurrence of these compounds in sediments or soils, but given the similarities in physical and chemical properties to the chlorinated dioxins, it is not unreasonable to expect similar transfer mechanisms, although the PBDD/Fs are more likely to suffer degradation due to the higher susceptibility of the C–Br bond. In these samples, apart from the set of cockles (which should be interpreted with care due to the low number of samples), there is poor correlation between concentrations of PBDD/F and PBDEs. This is perhaps unsurprising given the various processes of degradation, absorption, /metabolism and/or bio-accumulation that define the occurrence of both these sets of contaminants in shellfish.

Results from the UK shellfish survey showed congener profiles expected in relation to the hypothesis of biogenic formation (see above), and also significant levels of PBDFs. The congener profiles for the PBDFs (tri- to penta-brominated) had similarities to those observed for environmental samples, in that a wide range of PBDF congeners were observed. This congener profile suggests an origin from industrial activity and it is likely that the observed profile and levels are due to combustion processes, such as incineration. The predominance of PBDFs over PBDDs has also been observed in other

studies involving combustion. Thus, it is likely that the PBDD/Fs observed in these samples reflect both types of sources, biogenically mediated (Haglund et al. 2007) as well as anthropogenic.

Conclusion

The universal presence of PBDEs and PBDD/Fs in foods has been demonstrated, and provides baseline information on the concentrations found. A general lack of data for foods restricts comparisons, and leaves the question of trends unanswered. This is particularly relevant given the recent increase in bromine and brominated compound usage over the last two decades, especially with respect to BFRs. The dioxin-like toxicity arising from the occurrence of PBDD/F TEQ levels are lower than those reported for chlorinated dioxins (Fernandes et al. 2008), and estimates of dietary intake of these contaminants shows that it is unlikely that toxicity arising from these contaminants alone is of concern. However, the TEQ from PBDD/Fs is an important contribution to the overall burden of human exposure to dioxin-like TEQ that results from PCDD/Fs, PCBs, PCNs and other similar halogenated aromatic compounds, and may be particularly significant for high consumers of shellfish. The exact magnitude of the contribution will remain indicative until a comprehensive set of TEFs for PBDD/Fs, including the contribution from the tri-brominated compounds, becomes available.

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Table 2: Toxicity of PBDD/Fs and PBrClDD/Fs relative to 2,3,7,8-Tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin (TCDD). (from D'Silva et al. 2004)

PXDD/F Congener	TEF (Trout mortality)	Relative Potency (DR-CALUX)	Relative Potency (EROD)	Comparative Potency (EROD)	Relative Potency (AHH)	Relative Potency (EROD)	Relative Hydroxylapatite Receptor binding
2,3,7,8-Tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
2-monobromodibenzo-p-dioxin					< 0.01		< 0.01
2,7 / 2,8-dibromodibenzo-p-dioxin					< 0.01	< 0.01	0.07
2,3,7-tribromodibenzo-p-dioxin	0.02				0.02	0.02	0.86
2,3,7,8-tetrabromodibenzo-p-dioxin	1.14 -2.54	0.54	0.65	1.00	0.14	0.34	0.67
2,4,6,8-tetrabromodibenzo-p-dioxin					0.01	< 0.01	0.01
1,3,7,8-tetrabromodibenzo-p-dioxin	0.01				< 0.01	< 0.01	0.50
1,2,3,7,8-pentabromodibenzo-p-dioxin	0.08 - 0.14	0.49	0.30		0.12	0.12	0.15
1,2,4,7,8-pentabromodibenzo-p-dioxin					0.02	< 0.01	0.06
1,2,3,4,7,8-hexabromodibenzo-p-dioxin	0.01	< 0.01					
2-bromo-3,7,8-trichlorodibenzo-p-dioxin	0.65	0.39	0.94		0.09	0.10	0.09
1,2-dibromo-7,8-dichlorodibenzo-p-dioxin							
2,3-dibromo-7,8-dichlorodibenzo-p-dioxin		0.72	0.69		1.83	1.46	0.68
2,8-dibromo-3,7-dichlorodibenzo-p-dioxin	0.68				0.11	0.15	2.24
1-bromo-2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin		0.24	0.60				
2,7-dibromodibenzofuran							
2,3,7,8-tetrabromodibenzofuran	0.25	0.49	0.62				
1,2,3,7,8-pentabromodibenzofuran	0.04	0.41					
2,3,4,7,8-pentabromodibenzofuran	0.07	0.09	0.05				
1,2,3,4,7,8-hexabromodibenzofuran	< 0.01	0.02					
1,2,3,4,6,7,8-heptabromodibenzofuran		0.002					